

OTTO HEINEMANN

Oral History: EDITED VERSION

Birth Date: 1908

Interview NPS-46 by Margo Nash [later a *New York Times* reporter] on Jan. 31, 1974

Immigrated from Germany at the age of 22

Arrived in 1930 on a Hamburg-America line ship (exact ship name not recalled)

NASH: Today is January 31, 1974, this is Margot Nash, and I'm sitting in a restaurant in one of New York's top hotels [Roosevelt Hotel] speaking with a man, whose name is Otto, who is the *maitre de* at this restaurant. Otto was born in Bremerhaven, Germany and now we're going to hear how he came from Bremerhaven, Germany to this place that we're sitting in now.

HEINEMANN: My first desire to come here was when I was a boy playing on the docks in Bremerhaven, where I was born. These ships came in from America after World War One and I was impressed by all the things the [Americans] had on these boats. After the First World War, Mr. Hoover, [who later became] President of the United States, was in charge of a relief program for children in Europe. At lunch time in the schools in all the larger cities, they gave us a hot meal.

I was one of the undernourished ones in those days. I was eleven years old at that time. And I went there and got a bowl of barley soup and we got a big roll with it and we called it the Hoover *Brotchen*, which means a Hoover roll. Hoover was feeding the underprivileged children of conquered nations, mine too, and that [caused] me to be inspired to come here. And I assure you that [years later] I sent Mr. Hoover a letter and told him my story and he sent me a letter back.

So, after that, I had an apprenticeship in Germany in a bank. And after three years in the bank business, it was in 1925, they just told us [there was no more work.] Things got really bad in Germany. No more jobs.

So my father worked as a custom inspector in German customs—he [oversaw baggage] and so on—and that's how I got a job on a boat. I made eight trips to this country. I made eight trips here as a clerk in the steward's office, in the head steward's office, and then they taught me how to wait on people, that was back in 1925 and '26.

On the first trip I had in mind to just walk away, here in New York, but I couldn't do it because first of all I didn't know anybody here in this country. Also, my parents would look forward to receiving these canned goods that every trip I picked up at the grocery store here in Hoboken. So I really didn't have the heart to run away then.

What did America do after World War I that made Otto, as a young boy, like this country?

What was it like in Germany in 1925, seven years after the end of the war?

My first experience in New York when we came ashore, I remember the first place we went [was into one] of these ice cream stores and [we] had big ice cream sodas, two, three of them. It made

us nearly sick but we didn't have any ice cream [in Germany]. Then we went in the bake shop and had apple pie with all kinds of whip[ed] cream on it.

NASH: Did New York seem to be more fun to you in those days?

HEINEMANN: Well, for us as foreigners, it was real fun. We went to Coney Island, and rode the subway for the nickel, all the way [to] Luna Park, and we were impressed with all the things which we didn't have in [Germany]... I was very much interested and I had a mind to stay right there but I just didn't have the nerve to do it.

...After that I went to South America and I got myself a visa because I couldn't get anything for this country. ...I got a visa for Buenos Aires [in Argentina] that time.

In South America I left the boat with the understanding I would learn Spanish there and then return to work on the boat. That was in 1927, and I stayed there a year and a half. And even down there I could not control myself. I wanted to come to the United States in the worst way. So with these two other fellows, I took the railroad to the outskirts of Argentina and we start walking. We wanted to walk towards the United States and after about a week we gave up... With all the insects and all, you don't know what it is like in South America, and it gets warm. We got scared stiff so we went back to Buenos Aires.

So I was there another half a year and I came back to Germany, working myself back on a boat. And in Germany, first thing, I wanted to get back on a boat to go to the United States, but there was none. You couldn't get here. I went and worked a season in several places near the Czech border.

Then I went back to Hamburg with the intention of finding a ship, and I found a boat on the Hamburg-American Line. I was a steward, and then when we got to New York I finally got up the courage and the gumption and the nerve to just walk away and [not] come back. I got myself in touch with a passenger in third class and he... took my suitcases ashore, that's how I managed to get all my stuff ashore. I went to some friend I knew here and I slept over night there and that's how I just walked away finally. It was 1930, the height of the Depression and my first job was in the Barbizon Plaza Hotel, which just opened...the waiters needed to be European trained [like Otto].

What were Otto's first experiences in the U.S.?

How did he enter the U.S. to stay? Was what he did legal or illegal?

In 1933 I worked in the Fifth Avenue Hotel, and two fellows came to the door there, I was having my dinner in the back of the hotel, and someone says to me, "They want to see you." And I looked and I figured, they must be from immigration, I figured right away that they were. They were looking for me and wanted to ask me questions. Somebody had given my name to them, you must understand, times were real bad and there were other people who wanted my job and these people would give your name and then the immigration had to go after you and pick you up. But I spotted the [two men] and I got away from them. I walked out of the door and took a walk, but the immigration guards right away stopped me, and said, "Why are you running away from us?" I said, "Well, I have an idea why you want me." So they took me back to the hotel and

wanted to ask me questions. On the way back I turned around and punched this guy in the belly and I ran away again. Then they chased me with two taxis. After an hour they got me. They brought me to Ellis Island. That's where my real problems started.

NASH: This is in 1933. What happened to you at Ellis Island?

HEINEMANN: In Ellis Island, I still didn't want to leave this country, even [though] they picked me up. So somebody had some kind of a scissors and we were outside in the yard, they cut the wires, and we wanted to jump down and we wanted to swim over to Jersey. They caught us because they came around with a patrol boat and they caught us. I never got into the water, one guy was in the water already and as a result of this they put us in double security on the third floor, it was very bad. There were people there from other countries who were there for deportation because they had killed somebody somewhere, or for robbing banks and they put us there too. I never felt so bad in my life, when they brought me to Ellis Island.

NASH: I just want to get a little bit more about the conditions at Ellis Island.

HEINEMANN: Well, I tell you, we were given three meals a day there. We were in a big room. Outside there was wiring around where you could exercise and walk around and so on. And you had a library. I think I was treated better than any prisoner in any other country would be treated, that's for sure.

And somehow I relaxed there. It was bad times in this country and at least they gave you a meal at Ellis Island and you didn't have to struggle for it and you got it on the house [free]. They kept me there for about three weeks, after they found out where I came from, and then they deported me. They had my papers in order and they said, "You go back to Germany."

Otto tried twice to get away from immigration officials. What did he do?

Why was Otto sent to Ellis Island? Describe his experience there.

So since we attempted to swim off Ellis Island, there they had three detectives coming for me. They wanted to make pretty sure I got on that ship. Before I left Ellis Island they gave me a big lecture about how I could never come back to this country. So they left us locked up in the cabin under the ship and they put a guard in front, and then when the ship came out of the three-mile zone they came down and opened the cabin and then I could come [out].

I had a few dollars and we played Scot, played games on the boat and I made a few bucks to pay the steward a tip because they treated us like first class passengers.

When we came to Cuxhaven, and the German authorities took over, then the trouble started. [It was] 1933, just when Hitler took over Germany. Now they came over [to me] real Hitler style and everything. This guy greeted me with "Heil Hitler." And I said "Well, Heil Hitler, my brown shirt is in the suitcase." [NOTE: Otto is making a joke. Hitler's supporters sometimes were called "brownshirts" after the uniforms they wore.] I had been all over the world. I lived in Buenos Aires, I had a different attitude [than this guy], I had a sense of humor. I made fun of all these [Hitler] things, you know how it is in the United States, you make a joke of things.

So the guy got angry and said, “Oh, We're going to fix you, we're going to take care of you. You go get a ticket to see your parents and then [you must report to the government]. We will find a place where you will be the best use for the Fatherland [Germany].” But I had no such ideas.

I was [home] for a few days and I did not report [to the officials]. I was in my parents house, and they were surprised to see me because they thought I was in this country. After a week there came a policeman looking for me. I was standing behind the door, I told my mother, “[Tell them] I'm in the United States.” And she says, “No, he's not here,” and so on. So then I knew I had to get out someway. So now what am I gonna do? I want to come back to the United States. I figured I'd maybe get a ship to Mexico, but I couldn't get any papers in Germany, nobody would let me on a boat.

What had changed in Germany since Otto had slipped into the U.S.?

How had being abroad changed Otto's personality? What did the German official think of his sense of humor?

But the ship *Bremen* came in. I said to myself, “That's the quickest way to get back to United States.” So the night before the ship was going to leave I went on the pier. [I wore my pajamas and all my clothes under my overcoat since I couldn't bring a suitcase]. I knew you couldn't get on a boat so easily. But the officer on the gangplank there, I went to school with him. I said, “Look, I want to look around.” He says, “All right, go aboard.” So I went aboard with two sandwiches and a couple of bottles of water.

I found myself a hiding place over the coffee kitchen and the sundeck, a very small compartment. I climbed up there, I figured I'd sit there for about six days. The boat takes about five or six days so I'd hope for the best.

The next morning, the Gestapo [the Nazi German secret police] looked the whole ship over for people who might want to run away from the Third Reich. Young people who didn't want to join the army. But they didn't find me. So finally the ship moved, I heard the ship moving. Then we came to Cherbourg in France. The Gestapo officers were still on the boat, they looked the whole ship over again, they didn't find me, nobody looked in a place where they put boxes and old stuff over the coffee kitchen there. And I knew it was two o'clock in the morning when we came to New York, I could hear the band in a nightclub there.

NASH: How did you eat and survive?

HEINEMANN: I had two sandwiches and I had two bottles of Polinaris, it's some kind of schotz water, that's all I had. So you survive.

NASH: In six days you had two sandwiches?

HEINEMANN: Yes, it was nearly eight days before I got off the boat in New York.

Now I didn't realize what a problem it was to get off the boat. Remember the United States still had Prohibition. In New York City, the US Government agents come aboard. They know where to look for booze. They looked the ship over and all of a sudden somebody climbs up, and opens the door. I had hid myself in the corner, I had put old boxes in front of me and the guy flashed

the light and he said, “Okay” and slammed the door. I'm telling you, I really stopped breathing because if they would have caught me they would have sent me back again after two years in prison. But what [did I have to] I lose? But luckily they didn't see me.

So the next morning I jumped down from there when everybody was gone. I came down, but I fell down like a sack of potatoes, I couldn't [walk], you know, I was in a cramped position for eight days...

How long did Otto hide on board the ship? What did he have to eat and drink?

Who searched the ship in Germany? Why? In the U.S.? Why?

Why couldn't Otto walk right away after his journey?

I had an overcoat on and I had pajamas underneath and I had to get off the ship [before the new passengers came on and the ship returned to Germany.] I knew my way around boats, so I went down the freight elevator to get off the boat. To go down the gangplank you have to have a pass. So I took a book out and started to make notations on all kinds of goods that had arrived there on the ship. I said to the officer on the gangplank, I said, “Is that all that came?” He said, “No, there's some more on the pier.” So I just walked on the gangplank. He figured I had something to do with the office in New York and I made my notations and I walked out on the pier that way. And that was in Brooklyn, Prospect Park and 59th Street.

So when I get to the entrance of the pier somebody put their hand on my back. He said, “Listen buddy, if you want...” and he said it in German to me and he was a watchman on the pier. And he said, “Buddy, if you want to run away from this ship you better stick your pajamas in there and take that overcoat off.” It was in May, May the first, it was hot like the devil, and I had a winter overcoat on and pajamas sticking out. And he says, “Come on, I know what you're up to. Just forget it.” He was a nice man and so I just walked off the pier. And I went to Prospect Park in Brooklyn, I had fifty cents in my pocket. I got work at the Roosevelt Hotel and I've worked there since 1936.

How did Otto trick the officer on the ship so he could walk off?

What almost gave him away? Why do you think the watchman on the pier did not turn him in?

Here in the United States, I got acquainted with my wife and married her and then she found out I wasn't legal in the country.

NASH: Was she an American?

HEINEMANN: No, she was German born but she was [an] American citizen. And naturally as soon as she found out [that I wasn't legal] she came in contact with a lawyer and I went down and he advised me. He made applications to Washington. I was eligible for [a visa since I had a wife here], who needed me for her support, even though I had been deported once.

I had [to make] application in Havana, Cuba, to come to the United States. So [in 1940] I went on a Cuban airline as a passenger to Havana. In Havana there was at that time about a hundred thousand refugees there, mostly Jewish, from Germany, Czechoslovakia, and they were all waiting to come to United States. But I had preference [in the] quota, because of my wife's American citizenship.

So I had to see an American vice consul [in the embassy] there. I came into his office. He looked my papers over and everything that he had on me and he says, "Gee," he said, "You tried awful hard to come to this country." He says, "Gee, if we don't grant you a visa now, you most likely will find ways to come back." I said, "You bet your sweet life I will I come back maybe [through] Mexico." He says, "Look, we have enough trouble as it is," he says. "I think we'll make it easy all around. I'll give you the visa and we'll have no more problems."

So I finally came here, I mean, that's a hard way to come to this country. I mean, most people who come here to this country, they have an uncle over here, they make affidavit out, they have a job for them waiting, they come here, it's everything on a silver platter. You see, I came here, I had no other way, I had nobody here. And I wanted to come here in the worst way and like I said before, my first idea was on account of Herbert Hoover's great work relieving suffering in Europe, giving people food even if they were enemies before. And that impressed me so much. Now I am an American too. I'm very happy that I came here this way.

I got a nice family here, I got two boys, so I don't think the country lost anything by my coming here. My oldest boy, by the way, he is a clinical psychologist, he has a Ph.D., he is in Muncie, Indiana, he is in charge of a clinic for children. I have another boy. He is in Brooklyn Law School. Right now he's in his first year in law school. You see, it shows you how families integrate here, creating something out of nothing, so to speak.

I don't know what exactly you'll get out of this interview and the message you want to give people. I mean to come the way I came, I wouldn't advise anybody [to do it.] But I tell you, if I had to do it all over again I would do it because the result was good. And I think the country didn't lose anything. I am really connected to [the Roosevelt Hotel] I'm one of the fixtures. And I know a lot of good people. I waited on the Rockefellers, I waited on the Kennedys. I used to wait on them many times. Governor Al Smith [of New York], I used to take care of him and his wife in the restaurant here. [New York] Governor Rockefeller, [former New York City Mayor] John Lindsay, sitting right there in the seat in the corner there. In this hotel we served a lot of very prominent people.

How did his joke to the Nazi official change Otto's entire life?

What did Otto finally do to gain legal entry into the U.S.?

Does Otto think his entry to the U.S. has helped this country or not?

Do you think Otto explored legal ways of immigrating to the U.S. before his first entry into the U.S.? Why or why not?

GRAPHIC ORGANIZER for Ellis Island Oral History

NAME of immigrant: **Otto Heinemann**

FROM: _____

YEAR she came to the US: _____

AGE upon arrival: _____

PUSH-PULL: Why did he choose to leave home and come to America?

BECAUSE:

